HOW WILL YOU BE REMEMBERED?
Numbers 13:25-14:5
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In 1888 a wealthy industrialist sat down to his breakfast one morning, opened the newspaper and was stunned to read his own obituary. Unknown to him his brother had died suddenly in the night and the paper had made a mistake and printed his obituary which it had on file. When he recovered from the shock he read carefully - with dismay and growing discomfort. The obituary reported that he was the inventor of dynamite: that he had amassed a great fortune manufacturing armaments and that he was clelebrated for his innovations in the industrial production of the weapons of war. And that is all the newspaper said about him. That morning he made an important decision. Alfred Bernhard Nobel would be remembered for something other than being "The Dynamite King". And so he took his money and established five prizes for contribution to the good of humanity, one for peace making. Nobel received something few of us will ever get - an opportunity to see clearly the way in which he would be remembered and a second chance to determine that memory. He lived, by the way, eight more years to enjoy his new identity.

Now that is an old and favorite pulpit story. You may have heard it before. Ever since I heard it, it has stuck in my mind like a burr. Interestingly, the day after I wrote this sermon the memory of Alfred Nobel surfaced again - with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin. You and I don't ordinarily think in terms of the personal memory we are creating every day of our lives. Some of us, the Lincolns, the Churchills, and Douglas MacArthurs and Kennedys have a finely tuned sense of history. But frankly, most of us don't play in that league. If anyone remembers us it will hardly be for some heroic gesture made at a critical juncture of human history with cameras grinding and flashbulbs popping. Our memory, such as it is, will be celebrated by a rather smaller and far more intimate audience: our children and grandchildren, our friends and business associates. And yet I confess that the thought crosses my mind: how will I be remembered? How do you recall the people who have been significant in your life?

I am haunted by the suspicion, I confess, that many of us miss the significant moments, the potential-filled opportunities for doing something significant - something worth remembering, for lack of heart, lack of courage, or simply for lack of awareness that our small lives, our modest efforts can count for something. I confess that I sense in the spirit of the times something of the opposite - a cynicism about the individual so deep that many of us, unconsciously, have thrown in the towel and decided to live as quietly and unobtrusively and comfortably as possible and let it go at that. The picture tubes of the nation hadn't cooled off, after all, until the American people started telling the President that voluntary sacrifices for the common good were fine so long as someone else makes them.

I confess to being haunted by some of the most powerful and lonely and poignant words ever uttered by an American, Abraham Lincoln, December 1, 1862, the second Annual Message to Congress: "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We... will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the last generation..."

All of that, I think, is caught up in one of the most fascinating passages in the Bible. The people of Israel had been wandering around in the wilderness of Sinai after the Exodus and now they were approaching their destination and destiny, the promised land. Trouble was, there were people already living in it, cities

and towns and farms. So Moses dispatched a scouting party to survey the situation, made up of a representative from each tribe. They followed their assignment, explored the territory, looked around a bit, cut a bunch of grapes and returned to report to the anxiously waiting Israelite encampment. Being good Jews there was a difference of opinion, a majority report and a minority report. The minority spoke first: "We saw the land; it's good - flowing with milk and honey, its people are strong and its cities well fortified. But we can take it." Caleb, Tribe of Judah, said it: "Let's go get it." But then came the majority report: "We can't attack those people: they're stronger than we are. Those are big people living over there! Giants, even. They made us feel like grasshoppers." And with one voice the assembled people groaned and wished they were back in Egypt which while hard work was at least safe. And a few of them started to look around for a likely leader to take them back.

Well, they didn't go back. They mustered their courage and invaded the land and eventually took it. But that story has a terribly familiar ring to it. Those giants in the land across the river scowling menacingly in our direction: that feeling of pathetic personal insignificance: that propensity toward the safety and comfort of Egyptian slavery are not, I would submit, unfamiliar to any of us. If we have not done much worth remembering it is because we've stood in those particular shoes and hightailed it for the Egyptian border.

History is full of illustrations. We remember this Sunday, the Protestant Reformation and the figure of Martin Luther towering over it. Luther, as you may know, was an Augustinian Monk who spent his early years frantically seeking some sense of peace and wholeness and salvation. He prayed, fasted, worked, got awake in the middle of the night to flog himself with a leather strap - to no avail. And then one day, in the midst of his study he discovered St. Paul on the subject of law, grace and salvation. Salvation was free: he was saved, he discovered, not by the law; that is not by praying, fasting, flagellating himself, but by the gracious love of God in Jesus Christ. When a Papal representative set up shop in Wittenburg to sell Indulgences, which Luther regarded as the very epitome of the old, legalistic religion, he wrote out 95 Theses, nailed them to the door of the Church and waited for an opportunity to discuss the issue publicly. Luther didn't want to start a new church, or to be the key figure in one of the major eruptions in history. He wanted to talk a little theology. Ordered to recant, then excommunicated, finally branded an outlaw by the Holy Roman Emporer, Luther could have resolved the issue at a hundred critical moments by buckling under, by backing away. Certainly this lone German monk felt like a grasshopper on more than one occasion. But from the Castle of Wartburg, where he was hiding after his brave "Here I Stand" statement at the Diet of Worms, he wrote the great hymn now shared by Protestants and Catholics alike; "A Mighty Fortress is our God". The second stanza is autobiographical:

"Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he..."

Luther is remembered, not because he sat around thinking of ways to insure his immortality. But because, at critical moments, he pushed ahead, into the strange

and dangerous new land of the future. The hymn he wrote suggests how he did it. Personal courage was a part of it: good old German stubborness was no small factor either. But ultimately Luther could say that the "right man was on his side, the man of God's own choosing, Christ Jesus is his name". That is, God calls His people into the future. God is always on the side of the unfolding future. God is always in and beside the person who reaches down inside for courage and walks ahead. God is out front - not in the rear guard, offering safety and comfort in Egypt or Rome or wherever.

Now, we are not perched on the precipice of our destiny quite as dramatically as the Israelites: we do not have the resources of an Alfred Nobel nor the political opportunity of an Abraham Lincoln and the Protestant Reformation happened four centuries ato. But we Americans, by anyone's estimation are living in the midst of very precarious years. William Sloane Coffin says that it is not the promised land for us, but the promised time. Our technology and scientific prowess have brought us through the wilderness and up to the borders of a "promised time". We have now the capacity and the opportunity to eliminate hunger, to establish peace, to create a just and truly human society. But we're malingering at the border, nervously looking into the future and nostalgically over our shoulders to the safer and simpler past. University of California sociologist and historian, Robert Bellah, describes our story in terms of three great revolutions. The first included the War for Independence and the founding of the Republic. The second was the War Between the States and the preservation of the Union. Both of those revolutions are stamped indelibly on the American character. Both made us what we are. The third great revolution does not yet have a name because it is still happening. It began with three assassination s and the Civil Rights Movement. It was punctuated by a demonic Asian tragedy and illustrated at Mai Lai. It continued through the agony of Watergate and it is still not over as this nation struggles with those menacing giants now occupying the promised land: the polluted environment, the end of cheap energy, emerging nationalism in Africa which will no longer bend to the will of the West, and a life style based on unnecessary consumption which has long since been unable simply to pay for itself.

Bellah suggests that we are ill-equipped to face that future. To change metaphors, we keep sounding like the majority report in the Israelite camp: the past looks better and better and we keep looking for leaders who will take us back to it. As everybody knows by now, the issue in this election year is none of the urgent concerns of the nation, not to mention the world, but very simply - taxes. What is necessary for our survival in some kind of meaningful future, according to this scholar, is a rebirth of something so simple it almost eludes us; namely, a commitment to the common good. Somewhere along the way of our pilgrimage we traded in the common good for self interest. The political philosophers decorated it with fancy rhetoric and we came up believing that enlightened self interest is synonymous with public interest. Only it isn't often very enlightened. In fact, the result is unbridled, unapologetic selfishness which our forebearers were courageous enough to call sin. Somehow we have to recover the sense that there will be no future apart from a future Americans can walk into together. Somehow we have to find the traditional decency to stop laughing up our sleeve at a President who asks for a very modest restraint in the number of toys we buy next year. Somehow we have to find the old virtue of not boiling every great public issue, like the education of our children, down into the thin gruel of my tax bill next year. We will be remembered - in spite of ourselves. We cannot escape history.

What is corporate and national and communal comes to rest inevitably in your lap and mine. And in our laps, along with our world and national and community citizenship, is a lot of other material for which we will be remembered. There is no one here who doesn't know about the grasshopper syndrome. For each of us there is a future out there full of peril. For the young it is a series of choices so important that it seems sometimes easier to let someone else make them. For some of us it is a matter of choosing or changing a vocation: or deciding to be married, or to stay married or to begin afresh. For some of us it is a future of incapacity, illness and old age. For some it is the creeping apathy of unfulfilled hopes and receding dreams. For some it is so intensely personal no one but God and we know about it - something in us we can no longer live with - something we must change. And the word of the Lord, as old as Moses and Aaron and as contemporary as today's paper is the same. God will be in that future. God will stand with you and for you. The right man is on your side.

Jesus Christ, on a Sunday, long ago, decided for the future instead of the past. His friends were terrified. They stood in awe as they watched him turn His face to Jerusalem. They followed at a distance as He walked the road up from Jericho and they saw with their own eyes God's man playing out the eternal drama of salvation.

That same Jesus Christ, now risen and triumphant over the worst the world could do to Him, calls each one of us into the future. And more, that same Lord Christ, promises to walk into that future with us.

How will you be remembered? Perhaps not for very much or by very many. But it can be a memory of someone who cared and was committed and didn't shrink from the issues that characterized your day. You can, and will be, remembered for the integrity and passion and love with which you lived your life. You can, and will be remembered for the company you kept. I am reminded of that every time I preside at the funeral of one of the great saints of this congregation. And as I did a little autobiographical ruminating last week, this emerged as the most important thing of all for me - the company of Jesus Christ: the company of the faithful who lived in this world fully, but trying always to stumble behind and keep up with the living Lord of the future. My sphere of influence, my potential for a great memory, is limited. But I can, here, add my commitment and faith and love to that of a lot of others: Moses, Peter, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the great saints of this particular church: a Communion of Saints, which has felt the call of God and moved bravely into the future.

Robert Frost thought a lot about those moments when we make important decisions - and wrote beloved words which lend themselves, I believe, to the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

> Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
> And sorry I could not travel both
> And be one traveller, long I stood
> And looked down one as far as I could
> To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

"The Road Not Taken"
Twentieth Century American Poetry
p.66

In times past Your Spirit has picked up weary and frightened people and sent them into the future with confidence. Our Father, we pray for that renewing, recreating, life-giving and saving Spirit.

Amen.